

VZCZCXRO8174
PP RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHRN
DE RUEHMR #0378/01 2961107
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 231107Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY MASERU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4441
INFO RUCNSAD/SADC COLLECTIVE
RUEHMR/AMEMBASSY MASERU 4875

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000378

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/S, CA/ACS/OCS/AF, AND INR/AF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [CASC](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: LESOTHO: UNIVERSITY STRIKE LEAVES SEVERAL STUDENTS INJURED
AND TWO REPORTED DEAD

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Summary

¶1. According to Embassy sources and local media, National University of Lesotho (NUL) students rioted on Thursday, October 22, damaging university property; burning tires; and putting up barricades at campus gates. The riots occurred after students learned that allowances for books, food, and accommodation had still not been deposited to their individual bank accounts although courses began in August 2009. Campus security and police were called in to defuse the situation. Press reported two fatalities and an estimated 16 students injured. Post sources within the security establishment confirm the report of two fatalities. Post sources indicated that the Principal Secretary of Finance and Development Planning (the Ministry which oversees NMDS) will hold a press conference on Friday, October 23, to provide an explanation to the media and the public at large. A warden message was released to the local American citizen community.

NMDS defers blame to NUL

¶2. On Wednesday, October 22, students marched to the NMDS offices in Maseru to protest and register complaints about the delayed payment of food, book, and accommodation allowances. The NMDS told students to go back to Roma, because the allowances "had already been processed and would soon reach their individual accounts." (Note: NUL is situated in Roma, a small town about 35 km from the capital Maseru. End note). Intelserv reported that the Director of NMDS, Dr Letholetseng Ntsike, had earlier refused to address students, saying that all allowances for NUL students had been paid and it was "up to the banks to finalize the deposits." After some persuasion, students returned to campus with the understanding that funds would be reflected in their accounts the next day.

Students - fed up by delays in delivery of funds - take action

¶3. On Thursday, October 22, students assembled in front of the University Administration Building after learning that the promised funds had still not reached their individual bank accounts. Students then requested the university's administration to speak to them about the matter. Post sources indicate that when the students did not get a satisfactory answer, the situation erupted into a riot and students began damaging university property: hurling rocks at the University Bursar's Office and the campus security office; and attempting to set the University Hall on fire. Campus security was called in to diffuse the situation, later receiving reinforcement from

Roma police. Clashes between the students and the security forces (including police) subsequently ensued, resulting in the two alleged fatalities and a number of injuries.

Current status

¶4. NUL was closed indefinitely on Friday morning as protests continued. All students were ordered to vacate the campus by 11 a.m. local time until further notice by the police and university administration. Embassy contacts in the Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) were not available. Post sources at NUL claimed that police had used live rounds to disperse the crowds. Rumors circulating in town suggest that police used both live rounds and rubber bullets. Unconfirmed reports say some students have been taken into custody and their colleagues have threatened to go to Roma Police Station today to demand their release. Harvest FM reported that NMDS officials have changed their initial explanation regarding the payment of allowances, further information will be revealed at the Friday afternoon press conference.

Comment

¶5. There is no indication that further violence is expected, but post's Regional Security Officer and political specialist are keeping a close eye on the situation; a warden message was cleared by AF and CA and released to the American citizen community. The fact that students were killed by the police is shocking to everyone, particularly since one of the deceased is reported to be the daughter of the Commissioner of Prisons in Lesotho. These reported deaths have forced the government to take an extremely serious view of the situation. The evacuation

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of the students, the press conference by the Ministry, and the amended statements by the LMPS are expected to diffuse the situation rapidly, although there is concern that if students have been incarcerated in relation to the riots, fellow students may not let the matter go easily and will not expected to return to NUL until their colleagues are freed from jail. Post will provide updates as the situation develops.

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